

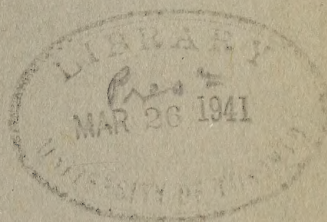
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Milton, John

**Milton**  
**Tercentenary Celebration**

THE ITALIAN JOURNEY

GEDDES, James (1853 - )



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**Address of Professor James Geddes  
before the College of Liberal Arts at the Celebration  
of the Milton Tercentenary  
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*Mr. President, Members of the Faculty,  
Students and Friends:*



MILTON'S ITALIAN JOURNEY, April 1638 to July 1639, is one of the most pleasing chapters in his literary biography. It is a ray of bright sunshine streaming across a rather sombre life. At the age of 24 Milton took his degree of Master of Arts at the University of Cambridge. Just before this, his father, then about in his 70th year, had secured a country home at Horton, quite near Windsor, and about seventeen miles from London. Here it was that Milton spent six years assiduously reading for his own pleasure Greek, Latin, Italian and English classics. Horton was an ideal retreat for a man of scholarly tastes like Milton. The proof of this seems plain in that, besides his own reading, he composed here a number of Latin hexameters and those gems among his English minor poems: "Comus," "Lycidas," "L'Allegro," and "Il Penseroso." The titles of these latter poems foreshadows his taste for things Italian. His preparation for undertaking the journey was of the finest kind.

Milton had long contemplated a project of a journey to Italy. After the death of his mother in 1637, his younger brother Christopher, who was already married,

came to Horton to live with his father. In the spring of 1638, Milton felt that his opportunity was at hand. He immediately secured his passport, no formality in those days, and with a man servant set forth via Calais for the Continent. He arrived in Paris in April or May, 1638. Although we have no data whatever as to Milton's impressions of the Louvre, Notre Dame, the Sorbonne and the Luxembourg, we do know that through letters of introduction, with which he was well provided from the English ambassador and other influential men, he met the most distinguished Dutchman of the day, Hugo Grotius, at that time ambassador of the Queen of Sweden to the King of France, Louis XIII. In connection with present day church affairs, it is interesting to note that just then Grotius was deeply interested in a plan for a union of nearly all the protestant churches. It must be remembered that we are in the Thirty Years' religious War period, which had Germany for its centre, but in which most of the nations of Europe were more or less involved. Suffice to say that Grotius was most friendly in his attention to Milton, who stayed but a short time in Paris. He went from there down through the South of France to Italy. From Provence, he probably entered Italy on the land side from Nice. The Italian Riviera must have been then as beautiful as today. Undoubtedly Milton must have experienced those sensations of charm and delight which sparkle in the pages of his countrymen Byron and Shelley. But this is mere conjecture. We know that if it be true, as it certainly was, that Italy had lost none of her physical beauty in the XVIIth century, this was the period of her greatest intellectual decadence. This is simply an illustration of the law of action and reaction. The XVIth century had been preeminently the Titanic age of Italian literature and art, represented by Michael

Angelo, Cellini, Vasari, Tasso, the last of the great poets, and by other geniuses known to all the world. Painting, too, had declined almost as much as letters; music held its own quite well. No men of great genius had come forward to fill the places of the epoch making writers of the golden age of Italian literature and art.

At the time of Milton's sojourn in Italy, the three writers whose influence made itself most strongly felt were, Marini, Tassoni, and Chiabrera. Of the three Marini is the best known. His influence was much felt in France. He is remembered in modern times in precisely the same way that the Spaniard Gongora is in literature, that is for the "*reo gusto*" or bad taste as represented in the canzoni, panegyrics, and epigrams of the period. Both Marini and Gongora who did much to establish this "*reo gusto*" had in their day, immense popularity. Right after Marini, Tassoni, and Chiabrera, all of whom had passed away just before Milton's visit to Italy, a host of mediocrities arose, whose work in general is termed, and properly, dilettantism. It is sometimes said this same condition of things exists to a certain extent right here among ourselves in America. We have had the record making period of Longfellow, Bryant, Whittier, Holmes, Emerson, and Hawthorne. It is impossible at the present time to name an equally remarkable group of American authors. Milton passed rapidly through northern Italy, visiting Genoa, Leghorn and Pisa, but we have no information regarding his visits to these interesting cities. It is only upon his arrival in Florence, where he spent about two months, probably August and September, 1638, that we have something tangible. Yet even in Florence no impressions whatever regarding Giotto's tower, Brunelleschi's "*duomo*," Dante's fountain in the Baptistry.

Socially and in a literary way the tastes of the age were represented in its most characteristic manner by the Academies. Throughout Italy at this time there were more than 500 of these academies. They filled somewhat the same role that our social and literary clubs or debating societies do today. Bologna had as many as 70 academies, Rome 56, Florence 20. Although Milton, then only in his 30th year was far from having the prestige his great work the "Paradise Lost" gave him later in life, nevertheless he was well enough known to be the object of a great deal of attention. Indeed, he himself mentions eight well known Florentine men of letters, all of whom were on most friendly terms with him, and at whose clubs he carried on discussion and read in Latin composed by himself for the occasion. But we must needs limit ourselves in this brief summary to mentioning Milton's meeting with one of the grandest figures that age produced: Galileo. Born in the same year as Shakespeare (1564), he had held for 18 years (1596-1614) a professorship in the university of Padua to which students from all parts of Europe were drawn by his lectures on mechanics. Poet, scholar, musician, and the best known scientist in his country, he made his home at Arcètri, a little way out of Florence, on one of the city's sunny vine-clad slopes. Here his observatory is still pointed out and the place is a favorite centre of attraction for tourists. In his declining years, Galileo was surrounded by a devoted group of enthusiastic students and friends, to whom he would show his telescope, or play his own music, or recite Latin or Italian poems. Just before the visit of Milton to Galileo, the latter had become totally blind. There is something pathetic in the thought that the same misfortune was to come to Milton. In speaking of Galileo, Milton says: "I visited the famous

Galileo, grown old, a prisoner to the Inquisition for thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican friars thought."

From Florence, Milton traveled on to Rome where during the months of October and November, 1638, he visited and studied those well known land marks of antiquity, the Coliseum, the Pantheon, the Capitol, Tar-pian Rock, etc. He received quite as much attention in Rome as in Florence, particularly from the Cardinal Barberini. He also had the supreme delight of hearing sing Leonora Baroni, the Adelina Patti of that day in whose honor he later composed three Latin epigrams.

From Rome, Milton continued his journey, going more than one hundred miles by carriage to Naples, stopping at the towns on the way as he found it convenient to break the journey. A traveler who accompanied him introduced him upon arriving in Naples, to Johannes Baptista Mansus, Marquis of Villa, a most noble and influential man, to whom Torquato Tasso addressed his "Discourse on Friendship." "As long as I stayed there" says Milton, "I experienced the most friendly attention from him, he himself acting as my guide to the different parts of the city and coming himself to my inn to visit me." Mansus who knew Tasso well and had written the "Life of Tasso" was also the friend of Marini, the popular writer of the period. Milton could hardly have found a more thorough and experienced literary guide to see the beautiful sights around the Bay of Naples. On parting with him, he presented him with a fine letter of thanks written in Latin hexameters. Manso showed his appreciation by presenting Milton with two beautiful cups and the accompanying epigram, the original of which is in Latin: "Johannes Baptista Mansus, Marquis of Villa, to John Milton, Englishman: Mind,

form, grace, face and morals are perfect ; if but thy creed were, then not Anglic alone, truly Angelic thou wouldst be."

This is merely an adaptation of a well known story of the beautiful Anglic youth seen at Rome by Pope Gregory, the sight of whom moved the Pope to the enterprise of converting pagan England to Christianity. The epigram is likely suggested from the fact that Milton was hardly as discreet in regard to talking upon religious matters while on the continent as would have been politic.

In the latter part of 1638, news of civil war in England reached Milton. It seemed to him ignominious to be traveling abroad for intellectual culture when his fellow-countrymen were fighting for liberty. He decided to go home immediately, giving up his contemplated journey to Sicily and Greece. On his way back he passed through Rome in January and February, 1639; through Florence where he was in the middle of April and participated in a number of Academy exercises. The compliments, usually composed in Latin, he received from his Italian friends are so grossly exaggerated as to be rather amusing. Here is a sample:

*To John Milton*

"Greece may exult in her Homer.  
Rome may exult in her Vergil,  
England exults in one equaling either of these."

Even in modern Italian of today such hyperbole is most frequent; in reality the intention is simply that of being markedly and pointedly polite. The pretty custom of exchanging compliments in Latin had well nigh disappeared. It appears to be inconsistent with the demands of the strenuous life.

From Rome, Milton is known to have made a trip to Lucca, about 40 miles distant, possibly to see the ancestral home of his college comrade, Charles Diodati, who died in England while Milton was abroad. He then crossed the Apennines and passed through Ferrara on his way to Bologna. Milton simply mentions this fact. Yet it is with these two cities, so rich in literary history, that his five sonnets and one canzone, all in Italian, are connected. Small as is this contribution of Milton to Italian literature, it is distinctly noteworthy because of the author and the poems themselves. Milton was thoroughly imbued with the Italian classics and had caught distinctly the Italian manner. The poems are addressed to a lady in Bologna. The Reno river flows between Ferrara and Bologna and has to be crossed at a ford which is mentioned in the first sonnet. Who the lady is, is not known. This has been, of course, the subject of much speculation.

## SONNET

### III

As on a hill, at brown of evening time,  
A shepherd maiden from some neighboring bower  
Waters with care a lovely foreign flower,  
Which spreads but ill in the unwonted clime,  
Far from the genial summer of its prime,  
So love in me, quick to express his power,  
Bursts into new speech blossom for an hour,  
While of thy haughty grace I try to rhyme  
In words that my good kinsfolk do not know,  
And change fair Thames for Arno's as fair tide,  
So hath love willed it; and by others' woe  
Right well I wot love will not be denied.  
Ah! were my heart, so hard, so slow to yield,  
To Him who plants from Heaven as good a field!

Qual in colle aspro, all'imbrunir di sera,  
 L'avezza giovinetta pastorella  
 Va bagnando l'erbetta strana e bella  
 Che mal si spande a disusata spera  
 Fuor di sua natia alma primavera,  
 Così Amor meco in sù la lingua snella  
 Destà il fior novo di strania favella,  
 Mentre io di te, vezzosamente altera  
 Canto, dal mio buon popol non inteso,  
 E' bel Tamigi cangio col bell' Arno,  
 Amor lo volse, ed io all'altrui peso  
 Seppi ch'Amor cosa mai volse indarno  
 Dch! foss'il mio cuor lento e' l' duro seno  
 A chi pianta dal ciel si buon terreno.

## CANZONE

Laughing, the ladies and the amorous youth  
 Accost me round:—"Why dost thou write," ask they,  
 "Why dost thou write in foreign phrase and strain,  
 "Versing of love with daring so uncouth?  
 "Tell us; so may thy hope not be in vain,  
 "And thy best fancies have auspicious way!"  
 Thus they go jeering. "Other streams," they say,  
 "Other far waves expect thee, on whose banks  
 "Laurels in verdant ranks  
 "Are growing, even now are growing, for thy hair  
 "The immortal guerdon of eternal leaves:  
 "Why on thy shoulders wilt thou this load bear?"  
 My song from me this fit reply receives:—  
 "My lady said (and what she says I treasure),  
 'This is the language in which love hath pleasure'."

Ridonsi donne e giovani amorosi  
 M'accostandosi attorno, e 'Perchè scrivi,  
 Perchè tu scrivi in lingua ignota e strana  
 Verseggiando d'amor, e come t'osi?  
 Dinne, se la tua speme sia mai vana,  
 E de' pensieri lo miglior t'arrivi;  
 Così mi van burlando: "altri rivi,

Altri lidi t'aspettan, ed altre onde,  
 Nelle cui verdi sponde  
 Spuntati ad or ad or alla tua chioma  
 L'immortal guiderdon d'eterne frondi  
 Perchè alle spalle tue soverchia soma?  
 Canzon, dirotti, e tu per me rispondi:  
 "Dice mia donna, e 'l suo dir è il mio cuore,  
 'Questa è lingua di cui si vanta amore'."

These two short Italian poems, selected from the six Italian contributions, remind one at once of those in Dante's "Vita nuova" both as regards the manner and the matter. The Italians themselves have criticized the poems on the whole rather favorably. They certainly have the true poetic inspiration which is the main factor and are interesting productions. More detailed criticism should come from a poet and native Italian.

Milton passed on from Bologna to Venice, spending there April and May, 1839 and frequenting as in Florence, Rome and Naples the Academies. From Venice he passed on to Geneva at that time the continental seat of Calvinistic protestantism. Milton himself says: "At Geneva I was daily in the society of John Diodati the most learned professor of theology." This was the uncle of his college friend Charles whose loss Milton so deeply lamented. From Geneva, he went via Lyons and the Rhone to Paris and from thence to London where he arrived late in July or early in August, 1839, having been gone about fifteen months.

To this period itself have been assigned besides the six Italian poems, the three Latin epigrams already noted: "Ad Leonoram Romae canentem," to the famous opera singer Leonora Baroni; his Latin scazons (iambictrimeter verses) to the Roman poet Salsillum; and the fine Latin poem already mentioned to his friend in Naples, Manso.

The importance of this brief journey abroad lies not so much in the excursion as in the influence it exerted on the later writings of Milton. The parallel so frequently drawn between the great poem of Milton and that of Dante is immediately suggested. But that is outside of the Italian journey. Both Milton and Dante, each in his way, are the most original of poets. For Milton, throughout the remainder of his life, the Italian journey ever remained one of the pleasantest of his memories.



